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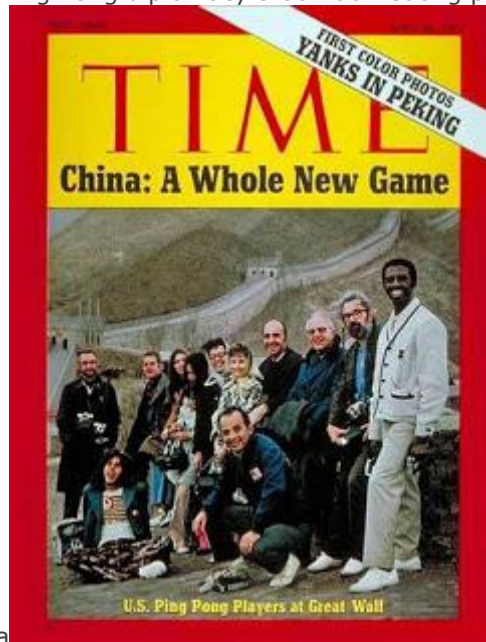
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# Ping Pong Diplomacy Revisited

June 24, 2008 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

*With "Ping Pong Diplomacy" back in the news recently, thanks to a rematch between Chinese and American table tennis players that [made headlines](#) on both sides of the Pacific, China Beat asked historian Xu Guoqi to write a short piece for us reflecting on the topic. As a specialist in Chinese international relations and the author of [a new book](#) that places the Beijing Games into historical perspective, he seemed an ideal person to weigh in on this subject.*  
By Xu Guoqi

2008 is China's Olympic year, which means that the world is watching that country through the lens of both sports and politics. However, this is not the first time China has attracted global attention because of sports. The 1971-1972 Ping Pong diplomacy that Mao Zedong played with the Americans



had more serious consequences than in this year's Beijing Olympic Games, since the result of the Ping Pong friendship games fundamentally changed the international political scene and reshaped the world order.

Thirty-eight years later, however, when the [Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library](#) celebrated the historical moment earlier this month by hosting an event called "American/Chinese Ping Pong Diplomacy: the rematch," many people still didn't know very much about the true story of what happened in the early 1970s or had forgotten parts of the tale that they once knew. In some cases, newspaper reports in very respectable periodicals even got some basic historical facts wrong. Two recent articles on the rematch, described below, are cases in points that illustrate a general pattern.

The first of these, published on June 13 in the *Los Angeles Times* and titled "[Cold War-era Ping Pong foes meet for some back-and-forth](#)," includes several ideas that are debatable at best. For instance, the article says that "Ping Pong is to China what soccer is to Brazil, and Geliang is the Pele of Chinese Ping Pong." The Chinese might be dominate players at Ping Pong but today's Chinese share the same passion and obsession as the Brazilians for the "beautiful game," namely soccer. And while Chinese men's soccer teams have not won many international matches, the Chinese women's soccer team has done very well in major tournaments and the Olympics. During the era of Ping Pong diplomacy, moreover, the "Pele" of Ping Pong was Zhuang Zedong not Liang Geliang (Geliang is his given name). Even today, more Chinese probably remember Zhuang than Liang.

These may seem only trivia issues, but a crucial fact is blurred in an article posted on the *New York Times* website on June 10. Titled "[China and the U.S.: Ping Pong diplomacy, 38 years later](#)," it describes Zhou Enlai inviting the American Ping Pong team to visit China in spring 1971. However, Premier Zhou did not want to invite the Americans that year and recommended to Mao that this not be done. It was Mao who in the last minute vetoed Zhou's recommendation and single-handedly decided to invite the team and thus started the famous Ping Pong diplomacy. In other words, Zhou might have gotten to serve as the happy and effective messenger, but Mao was the person who wrote the message. This article also got another smaller fact wrong. It claimed that the three-day tournament in the Nixon Library would include a match between two of the original players, Tim Boggan and Liang Geliang. It is true that Liang was an original player, but Boggan was not. In fact, Boggan went to Beijing in spring 1971 not as a player but as an official of the U.S. Table Tennis association.

These may seem like small points, but in a matter as historically significant as the opening of relations between two of the world's great powers, the details do count. And as anyone who follows sports knows, in the realm of athletics little errors can quickly add up and become consequential. The same can be true with the history of international relations.

*Xu Guoqi's latest book, [Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008](#), includes a detailed study of Ping Pong diplomacy.*